



Charnock, H. (2016). "This Haunting Sadness": Press coverage of John Corrie's Abortion (Amendment) Bill, 1979-1980. *Women's History*, 2(5), 16-22. <https://womenshistorynetwork.org/womens-history-summer-2016/#Purchase>

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# **“This Haunting Sadness”: Press coverage of John Corrie’s Abortion (Amendment) Bill, 1979-1980**

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In July 1979 an article entitled ‘Abortion and the Press’ written by the Irish journalist Mary Kenny was featured in *The Spectator*.<sup>1</sup> Kenny here argued that ‘almost all the national newspapers are broadly pro-abortion’ and that they made ‘no attempt’ to provide balance in their coverage of the issue. Attributing this trend to the morally liberal nature of journalists and to the continued distaste for the culture of backstreet abortions which preceded the 1967 Abortion Act, she went on to suggest that the monopoly of pro-abortion discourse in the press fundamentally undermined the notion of free choice. Yet, whilst Kenny may have been right in suggesting that the British news media was largely opposed to attempts to restrict access to legal abortion, a close analysis of press coverage of John Corrie’s 1979 Abortion (Amendment) Bill reveals that discussion was far from dominated by a radical ‘pro-abortion’ agenda. Indeed, the rhetorical techniques and conceptual frameworks that were used to justify and promote this position largely undermined the feminist claims to body rights that were advocated by those in pursuit of ‘abortion on demand’. The pro-abortion position held by the news media was instead one rooted in pragmatism, resting upon the notion that abortions were inevitable and that it was thus in the public interest that women had access to legal abortions performed by medical professionals.<sup>2</sup>

For several decades scholars of abortion politics have sought to interrogate the discourse which has influenced the shape and tone of the abortion debate in the West. However, the understanding that ‘language both reflects and shapes social reality,’ has thus far only been applied to analysis of the rhetoric of lobbyists on either side of the debate.<sup>3</sup> As Gail Davis and Roger Davidson have noted, whilst there has been much written on the 1967 Abortion Act, the historiography of abortion in Britain in the twentieth century has been dominated by accounts of political manoeuvring.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, as investigation into abortion in Britain has focused on the

ways in which access to legal abortion became enshrined in law, little historical research beyond Davis and Davidson's own work has been conducted into the status of abortion post-1967.<sup>5</sup>

Whilst there is, of course, a need to interrogate the rhetorical culture of the abortion debate as articulated by politicians and lobbying groups such as the National Abortion Campaign (NAC) or the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children (SPUC), discussion of the broader public discourse on abortion must move beyond this and consider the ways in which such discourse was represented, appropriated and circulated by the British news-media. By examining the mechanisms through which abortion was presented in a number of national newspapers, women's magazines and an episode of the BBC current affairs programme, *Panorama*, this study uncovers the ways in which abortion discourse functioned within the news-media during Margaret Thatcher's first term in government. Acknowledging that no individual's opinion would have been shaped by the representation of abortion in a single media form alone, this research considers how the collective output of these publications contributed to a broader public discourse. Of particular concern are the recurring tropes and conceptual frameworks which formed the core of the abortion discourse across these forms. The ubiquity of the victim narratives trope demonstrates the extent to which 'apologetic' abortion rhetoric had become cemented as the dominant language of abortion discourse by the early 1980s. It is argued that such discourse only accentuated the divide between 'worthy' and 'unworthy' abortions and thus reaffirmed abortion stigma and perpetuated abortion taboo by heightening the sense of deviance which accompanied less traditionally sympathetic abortion experiences. As such, whilst journalists may have understood themselves to be 'pro-abortion', it is suggested that the conceptual frameworks they employed to articulate their opposition to restrictive abortion legislation undermined the broader project of advocating female reproductive rights.

### **John Corrie's Abortion (Amendment) Bill**

Whilst historians have often hailed the 1967 Abortion Act as a watershed moment representing the triumph of liberal sexual morality, it can be argued that British abortion law remains inherently conservative. Under British statute, abortion remains illegal under the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act. The 1967 Act simply allowed women to obtain an abortion up to

the twenty-eighth week of pregnancy on the provision that two doctors certify that the continuation of pregnancy would endanger the physical or psychological health of the mother, or that the foetus was severely deformed or disabled. Women in Britain thus never had the right to abortion on demand; medical grounds remain the only legal justification for terminating a pregnancy.

Furthermore, despite having support from within the medical profession, the legalisation of abortion remained controversial long after the 1967 Abortion Act was passed. Though the Lane Committee (a committee of enquiry into the working of the 1967 Act) offered unanimous support for the Act in its original form in its report of 1974, by 1982 eight attempts had been made to legislatively restrict access to abortion, including Bills put forward by James White in 1975, Francis Benyon in 1977, and Bernard Braine in 1978.<sup>6</sup> The most notable challenge, however, was initiated by John Corrie, the Scottish Conservative MP for Bute and North Ayrshire, after the landslide victory of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party in the 1979 election. Corrie's Private Member's Bill initially proposed reducing the upper time limit for abortion from 28 weeks to 16, though parliamentary debate forced Corrie to raise the proposed limit to 20 weeks with potential for the Secretary of State to reduce the limit further. More significantly, however, the Bill sought to restrict the criteria that determined the eligibility of requests for abortion: the Bill stipulated that abortions would only be obtained if physicians would certify that the risk of continuing pregnancy was "substantially" greater than that of having an abortion. If passed, the legislation would also have greatly limited the abortion services provided within the charitable sector by banning the provision of counselling by organisations who performed abortions.

Proponents of the Bill insisted that the amendments were intended merely to tighten up the existing legislation so as to 'put a stop to the practice of abortion on demand in defiance of the 1967 Act'.<sup>7</sup> However, opponents of the Bill, including the British Medical Association, vehemently argued that it was a gross understatement to call Corrie's proposals 'amendments', claiming that the Bill was tantamount to a radical reimagining of the 1967 Act which would have a devastating impact on access to abortion in Great Britain.<sup>8</sup> Despite substantial lobbying efforts by supporters of both sides of the debate, Corrie's Bill was defeated as a result of canny political manoeuvring by opponents who waited to introduce amendments to the Bill until it was on the floor of the House of Commons in order to protract debate beyond the allotted timeframe.<sup>9</sup>

Although this attempt to limit access to abortion ultimately failed it was hugely significant in triggering public debate on the issue of abortion. As political debate intensified and interest groups on either side of the aisle mobilised their bases of support, the press was forced to engage with the abortion debate not only in its capacity as a provider of news but also due to its perceived role as an informer and educator of the British public.<sup>10</sup> It is within this context, therefore, that we should consider the desire for journalists and commentators to render explicit their understandings of the potential influence of the rhetorical culture in shaping the abortion debate.

### **Abortion Rhetoric and the Press**

In her piece, 'Abortion and the press', Mary Kenny sought to highlight the pro-abortion bias of the British news-media. She noted how 'The *Guardian*, the *Observer*, the *Sunday Times* and the *Mirror* papers are broadly pro-abortion' and lamented that even those publications which were anti-abortion (the *Sunday Telegraph* and the *Sunday Express*) were reticent to run features about 'the reality of what is happening'.<sup>11</sup> Initially Kenny framed this situation as problematic on the grounds that the press was failing to adequately represent the attitudes of the British public; in her words, 'although nearly half the British people are against abortion, it is an interesting phenomenon that in the national press, this section of the population is dramatically unrepresented.' She explicitly linked social reality with rhetorical culture by questioning 'how healthy a society is when a prevailing orthodoxy dominates the means of communication', thereby insinuating that the hegemony of 'pro-abortion' discourse was indicative of a broader societal rot. However, the insidiousness of this situation lay not only in the fact that the press was misrepresenting the public's views on abortion, but that it was misinforming them and preventing them from taking an informed stance on the issue. Appropriating the language of choice usually employed by supporters of legal abortion and abortion on demand, Kenny suggested that the 'unrelenting orthodoxy' of pro-abortion positions articulated in the British press undermined the capacity for informed choice: 'A Woman's Right to Choose, if it means anything, should mean a woman's right to full freedom of information'. What was at stake was the very ability of the British public to take a fully informed stance on the issue of abortion for individuals 'cannot possibly make a choice in any sense of the word unless you are equipped with the full facts.'<sup>12</sup>

Kenny's critique of the British press and its stance on abortion in this particular editorial was thus clearly rooted in a belief that the news media was directly involved in shaping public opinion. Though her initial claims regarding the levels of public support for abortion demonstrate her disappointment that the anti-abortion views held by 44 per cent of the population were not proportionally represented and reflected in press coverage, her later concerns regarding freedom of choice rest upon the notion that the press was failing its obligation to educate and reliably inform the public. Though Kenny undoubtedly used this argument as a means of pursuing her own anti-abortion agenda, the notion that the press had a duty to the British public continued to be widely understood in this period, not least by the news-media itself. As Adrian Bingham has suggested, although newspapers, particularly the tabloids, in this period were increasingly sacrificing news coverage for entertainment and titillation, they never fully rejected their previously claimed role of providing a public service.<sup>13</sup>

The belief that the press had a unique influence over public and political opinion and should thus present current affairs in a balanced manner was explicitly demonstrated when the International Pro-Life Information Centre filed a complaint with the Press Council over the *Times*' coverage of John Corrie's Abortion (Amendment) Bill on the basis that a report was 'biased and inaccurate and might have influenced MPs to stay away from the vote'.<sup>14</sup> Elsewhere, press coverage of the Corrie Bill is notable for the readiness of journalists to draw attention to the rhetorical techniques used to persuade people to oppose legal abortion. For example, in a segment claiming to demonstrate 'How the pros and antis line up', a *Daily Mirror* piece (quoting a spokesperson from the British Pregnancy Service) listed examples of 'how propaganda is used' by groups such as the SPUC, noting in particular the utilisation of 'horror stories' in publications such as the 1974 book *Babies for Burning*.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, other journalists were keen to note how 'shock-horror tactics' involving 'sensational stories' of live-abortions were 'part of the business of creating fear'.<sup>16</sup> Journalists of this period thus recognised that the news-media was deeply embroiled in the shifting 'propaganda initiatives' of the abortion debate and many remained wary of the service their employers performed for the anti-abortion lobby by continuing to publish stories of 'live' abortions.<sup>17</sup>

Kenny and her peers were thus confident of the persuasive power of the news-media's presentation of the abortion issue. Yet, their concern appears to have been directed at the explicit

politics of the issue, namely, whether the press was for or against legal access to abortion and how they articulated that position to their readers. If we move beyond the language of self-identification, however, to interrogate the abortion discourse of the news-media more closely, we can identify how the so-called 'pro-abortion' press overwhelmingly framed the issue in ways which perpetuated and reinforced the stigma and taboo around abortion. Whilst Kenny claimed that it was only the 'anti-abortion' papers that were willing to identify abortion as 'tragic' and note 'how it can only ever be accepted as a last resort', this was, in fact, the default position of all mainstream press discourse on abortion. Whilst editorial writers and popular columnists such as Marje Proops and Bel Mooney explicitly positioned themselves as being in favour of legal access to abortion and opposed to John Corrie's Bill, the primary way in which they articulated their stance was through apologetic abortion rhetoric which understood abortion as a tragic necessity.

### **Apologetic Abortion Rhetoric**

'Apologetic abortion' rhetoric pre-dated the Corrie debate but once the Corrie Bill directly threatened legal access to abortion this discourse intensified. In the face of the proposed restrictive legislation, those who opposed to the bill sought public support by presenting themselves not as feminists with radical views on body rights but instead as realistic pragmatists. Indeed, the press often presented the feminist 'pro-abortion' lobby with disdain. In a piece seemingly lamenting Corrie's attempt to 'put the clock back', Paul Ferris described feminist groups as inclined to 'over-react' on the topic of abortion and suggested that 'cannier' pro-abortion campaigns avoided association with them despite their aligned agenda on the issue.<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere, in a special feature on the abortion debate, the *Daily Mirror* included a small piece on the feminist 'Fight for "freedom"'. Far from portraying women's groups as champions of women's rights, however, the piece used the language of terrorism to describe the feminist ultimatum on abortion. According to this article, women were 'militant' and willing to 'flout' and 'break' the law through an 'underground network of women'.<sup>19</sup> In contrast to the victim narratives that dominated the feature's other pieces and abortion discourse more generally, here the fact that women were willing to organise themselves and take direct action was portrayed not only as deviant but as thoroughly dangerous. Whilst historians have since noted the invaluable contribution that feminist campaigns made to passing

the 1967 Abortion Act and rebuffing subsequent challenges to abortion access, commentators in the late 1970s and early 1980s did not wish to be tarnished by association.<sup>20</sup> While few went as far as Christopher Booker who damned women in favour of legal access to abortion for their rejection of 'their instinctive, unconscious selves', describing them as 'haggard-faced flocks ... who have become obsessed by the 'right' to destroy unborn life to the exclusion of almost all else,' journalists remained wary of endorsing abortion outright.<sup>21</sup> Instead, they presented themselves as rational navigators of the abortion debate, taking the position that so long as unwanted pregnancy was a tragic inevitability it remained in the public interest that women had access to safe and legal, medically performed abortions.

Marje Proops, a female columnist and agony aunt for the *Daily Mirror* very heavy-handedly utilised the apologetic abortion approach in her contribution to the newspaper's special feature on the Abortion Bill in February 1980. Calling her piece 'This Haunting Sadness' and going on to describe abortion as 'an ugly word for an ugly medical procedure,' 'a hateful subject,' a 'grim experience' and 'a last, desperate resort in a desperate situation,' it could not be clearer that, while Proops considered herself a vehement supporter of maintaining legal access to abortion, she could not define abortion in anything other than negative terms.<sup>22</sup> By simultaneously couching abortion in a language of misery and desperation and articulating the necessity of legal abortion, Proops positioned herself as occupying the pragmatic middle-ground in an otherwise highly dogmatic debate.

Proops' column represents one of the most explicit examples of apologetic abortion rhetoric but positions similar to hers were articulated throughout the news-media of this period. On the eve of the second reading of John Corrie's Abortion Amendment Bill in the House of Commons, an article entitled, 'The Decision That Only Women Can Make,' written by the popular columnist Bel Mooney appeared in the *Daily Mirror*.<sup>23</sup> Whilst the piece went on to make some fairly radical claims regarding a woman's right to '[make] choices as a free and responsible adult', it is telling that these were declared at the end of the article so that only those interested and invested enough to read the whole piece were privy to these 'extreme' views, with cursory readers exposed only to the tempered down, apologetic rhetoric. Indeed, the opening lines of the article conformed to the stereotype of women as cautious, full of self-doubt and unsure of their own minds: 'Sometimes I



don't know what I think. Sometimes I can't make up my mind.' Four sentences later she asserted her maternal instinct by stating that, 'I have never had an abortion and sincerely hate the idea. I love babies. I hate death'. Though Bel Mooney defended the right to abortion in the abstract, she explicitly distanced herself from women who had abortions and rejected motherhood. In so doing she not only implicitly acknowledged the taboo around abortion but actively perpetuated the perceived binary between women who terminated pregnancies and those who embraced their maternal instincts.

Such rhetoric was not merely confined to the tabloid press, however. Journalists for *The Guardian* similarly described abortion as a 'grisly business' and often expressed the sentiment that all women who had abortions agonised over the decision, only considering abortion as 'a drastic solution to a drastic problem'.<sup>24</sup> Numerous editorials published during this period asserted the need for legalized abortion on the basis that it was the only viable option in a 'humane and decent society'.<sup>25</sup> *The Times* remained largely silent on the Corrie Bill. When it did offer comment, however, it articulated views which only very tentatively supported legal access to abortion as laid out by the 1967 Act. Its editorials indicate a great preoccupation with questions regarding the rights of the foetus and whilst they articulated a degree of sympathy for women experiencing unwanted pregnancies (especially those with whose foetuses showed signs of disability), their position was one dominated by calls for moderation and continued rational debate.<sup>26</sup> As such, it is unsurprising that they felt that John Corrie's 'moderate' Abortion (Amendment) Bill 'deserve[d] success'.<sup>27</sup> Whilst *The Times*' position was considerably different from that of *The Guardian* and other pro-abortion publications, the underlying principle regarding abortion was the same across the spectrum: for the British news-media in the early Thatcher years access to abortion was an unfortunate social necessity; in an ideal world it would no longer be required.

Apologetic abortion rhetoric was thus ubiquitous in the press throughout its coverage of Corrie's legislative challenge to the 1967 Abortion Act and beyond. Whilst the news-media broadly supported legal access to abortion in Britain, it continued to portray abortion as a lamentable inevitability of contemporary life. The remainder of this paper will dissect further the apologetic abortion rhetoric of the most vocal opponents of restrictions on abortion, namely *The Guardian* and the *Daily Mirror*, to demonstrate the extent to which the key tropes of victim narratives and abortive

guilt dominated the abortion rhetoric of this period and served to undermine any alternative form of discourse on the subject.

### **Victim Narrative 1: Teenage Girls**

The most pervasive of the tropes comprising apologetic abortion rhetoric was that of the victim narrative in which women who sought abortions were portrayed as deserving of sympathy. Victim narratives remain a staple of pro-abortion discourse in the twenty-first century, however, unlike in contemporary discourse the victims most closely associated with abortion in the late-1970s and early 1980s were not so much those who had been explicitly abused (i.e. those who had been subjected to incest or rape) but women who were seen to have been exploited in some way. The two dominant stereotypes of abortion in the news-media were vulnerable teenage girls who had been manipulated by their partners, and married women who already had children and faced mental exhaustion and financial ruin if forced to raise another child.

Hera Cook has noted how the late twentieth century witnessed a shift in understandings of problematic female sexuality with the primary subject of scrutiny shifting from unmarried women to adolescent girls in the decades after the so-called 'Sexual Revolution'.<sup>28</sup> Whilst there is definitely evidence to support the claim of growing public concern over adolescent sexuality in the late 1970s, discussion of abortion in the media tended to avoid the uncomfortable matter of teenage sexual agency, instead portraying young women who sought abortions as victims. On the tenth anniversary of the Abortion Act, Marje Proops defended the Act in the *Daily Mirror* by making reference to the 'suffering and deep despair of women forced to carry unwanted, unplanned babies,' illustrating her point by relating a letter she had recently received from a woman whose seventeen-year-old daughter had become pregnant by a married man.<sup>29</sup> Several months later the paper's women's page had a whole page feature on 'A Sad Story That Statistics Cannot Tell,' containing a detailed account of 18-year-old Jill's story of pregnancy and abortion.<sup>30</sup> It described her 'anguish' of obtaining an abortion after having had unprotected sex. In both these instances the teenagers were portrayed as having been taken advantage of – the second article even captioned the page's photo with 'Victim of love.' Moreover, both teenagers were characterised as 'good' girls who had been manipulated by their partners – the girl of the first story was impregnated by an

older, married man whilst Jill's boyfriend 'refuse[d] to wear a contraceptive sheath'. Both girls were thus portrayed as having been exploited and as such were powerless to prevent pregnancy. As neither girl was presented as having possessed sexual agency, any potential responsibility for their pregnancy is assuaged.

These discussions of naïve and exploited adolescent sexuality resulting in pregnancy and abortion often tapped in to continuing anxieties regarding sex education and family planning for adolescents. The instance above, for example, indulged concerns regarding the continued divide in sexual culture regarding male responsibility for birth control by describing the male partner's unwillingness to use contraception. Elsewhere, the necessity of abortion was attributed to the inadequate provision of contraceptive supplies and sexual education resulting in an adolescent sexual culture that intensified the risk of pregnancy. One discussion of the Corrie Bill in the *Daily Mirror* opened with the story of 'a frightened young girl of nineteen' who had an illegal abortion in 1966 after becoming pregnant by an older man.<sup>31</sup> The article claimed that, 'Like so many young girls she was more worried about the image she presented to men than about contraception. She didn't want to appear a tease.' *The Guardian* and the *Observer* expressed similar sentiments by repeatedly invoking the image of 'the very young school girl who concealed her pregnancy' as a reason to reject Corrie's attempt to limit the time limit on abortion.<sup>32</sup> Expressing their objection to the attempts to legislatively restrict access to abortion, the British news-media thus drew upon the trope of the desperate young girl whose promising future was threatened by unexpected pregnancy. Teenage girls seeking abortions were thus typically portrayed as passive victims not only powerless to resist the advances of male sexual partners but unable to ask for help or advice about sex and contraception and thus prevent the need for abortion in the first place. Access to legalised abortion was thus justified on the basis that to deny such girls the ability to terminate their pregnancy would be cruel punishment for crimes committed against them.

## **Victim Narrative 2: Overburdened Married Women**

The alternative victim narrative invoked in discussions of abortion in this period was that of the overburdened married woman. Married women, particularly those who already had children, could not so readily be characterised as lacking sexual agency (and therefore responsibility) and

so they were primarily portrayed within abortion debates as victims of circumstance. In many cases these women described how they already had children and felt that they could not support another. For example, one interviewee on *Panorama* described how she felt obliged to have an abortion as she already had 5 children, one of whom was handicapped.<sup>33</sup> In July 1980, the magazine *Good Housekeeping* ran a feature which detailed the stories of four women who had had abortions.<sup>34</sup> Whilst one of the women interviewed had been a teenager at the time of her abortion the other three were all married with children when they had their abortions. Pat was 26 and had two children under 4 and described how panic stricken she was upon finding out that she was pregnant again: 'I knew it would be intolerable to have another ... I could barely cope as it was, I felt so tired, so hemmed in'. Though the selection of featured stories in part undoubtedly reflected the interests of the magazine's key demographic (namely, married women), given the publication's conservative outlook it is unsurprising that they selected case studies which were deemed to more easily evoke empathy among readers.

We must of course be careful not to undermine the experiences of these women and the genuine physical, mental and financial pressures that prompted them to obtain abortions. However, the ubiquity of such narratives demonstrates a desire to justify access to legal abortion on the basis of women's misfortune and continued oppression. Indeed, the experiences of these women demonstrate a key contradiction of social life under Margaret Thatcher's government: whilst there was undoubtedly a renewed emphasis on women as mothers and homemakers, the restriction of maternal rights, particularly in relation to employment, reduced the financial capabilities of individual families to support more children.

In light of economic difficulties and increasingly repressive social policy, the strains on families were great. Sections of the press identified many of the policies of Margaret Thatcher's government as being socially conservative and signalling a desire to return to times before the social and sexual liberation of the mid-century. In its discussion of the Corrie debate, the left-wing periodical *New Statesman*, pointed out that attempts to restrict access to legal abortion were part of a broader programme of policy which restricted women's rights in the workplace and in society more generally. As time went on, the initial suggestion of the left-wing press that women were being coerced in to the role of stay-at-home mothers by a government who seemingly wanted

them, 'barefoot, pregnant and in the kitchen,' appeared to become reality.<sup>35</sup> In December 1979, the *Daily Mirror* ran an article entitled 'Lose a Baby – and Your Home,' in which it expressed outrage at a plan by the Conservative-controlled Wandsworth Council which sought the power to evict women who had abortions or miscarriages from council houses that had been provided by virtue of their pregnancy.<sup>36</sup> Pregnancy and motherhood guaranteed homeless women accommodation, the rejection of pregnancy forced them back on to the streets.

Yet, for all that Conservative social policy indicated a desire for women to remain mothers and homemakers, the economic situation in 1980s Britain prevented this from being a reality in many homes. The unemployment rate in Britain rose from 5.9% in June 1979 when Margaret Thatcher's premiership began to 11.9% in June 1984; in March 1981, over 2.4million Britons were out of work.<sup>37</sup> In light of this, the financial capacity of many women to have children diminished significantly. Given this economic climate, many women (including those in stable marriages) were unable to afford a child and thus chose to terminate unplanned pregnancies. Reflecting this, in May 1981, a spokesperson for the British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS) claimed that, 'With a husband on the dole many wives cannot afford another baby. The Government is making it much more difficult for women to have a free choice about whether to have a child.'<sup>38</sup>

Women were thus portrayed in the press as victims not only of unfortunate circumstances but also of repressive Conservative policy. As a result these women could not be held accountable for needing an abortion – social and financial burdens were determining their actions – and their behaviour was therefore not perceived as deviant. Whilst married women seeking abortions seemingly contradicted the government's desire to see women return to the home, it should be noted that any sense of blame or distain for these individuals was further limited by the fact that, having had other children, these women had already fulfilled their 'primary purpose' in society and therefore could not be interpreted as having entirely rejected their biological destiny.

## **Abortion Guilt**

The other dominant, though not entirely compatible, trend of abortion discourse in this period was the notion that guilt was implicit to the abortion process. Similar to the victim narratives previously described, this language of guilt was rooted in the understanding that abortion was

inherently bad; seen as killing a potential human or as a rejection of motherhood, abortion was ultimately troubling and acceptable only in certain circumstances. This assumption thus inferred that all women who had abortions would acknowledge their wrongdoing and feel guilty about their decision to end their pregnancy. However, for all that victim narratives and constant references to guilt stemmed from the same root understanding, these two features were not entirely congruent; there existed a tension between the passive victim narratives that assuaged women of blame after having terminated a pregnancy and the implied female agency which resulted in guilt. Whilst victim narratives depicted women who had abortions because they had no other choice, guilt stories required that individuals made conscious choices they realised were reprehensible.

An explicit exploration of this trope occurred in a 1981 feature in *Cosmopolitan* magazine entitled 'Stop Pleading Guilty'.<sup>39</sup> The article's introduction suggested that the piece would help readers to identify the source of their guilt and take constructive action. However, after having explored guilt as rooted in sexual anxiety and poor work life balance among other sources, the article turned to abortive guilt and its form and function shifted away from providing advice to simply warning individuals against terminating a pregnancy. This section told the story of the author's friend Judy who had an abortion after becoming pregnant from a one-night stand. Judy's abortion resulted in an infection which left her bed-ridden in hospital for several days whilst her 'bleeding and pain, reminded her most sorely of the life she had nipped in the bud.' Unsurprisingly, 'She felt flooded with remorse.' In the following months, 'crushed under the weight of her guilt,' Judy became listless, depressed and reclusive. Six months after the abortion Judy's periods stopped and her failure to menstruate was described as her body and psyche seeking a 'fitting penance for her "crime"'. Eventually Judy met a new man and finally had 'a chance of restoring her fractured self-esteem.' Judy married this man but proved unable to become pregnant and slipped back in to depression: 'Until she has the child she denied herself before, Judy has regimented all joy out of her life.'

Regardless of how compelling we find this psychologism, the clear implication was that both Judy and the author believed that Judy's decision to reject maternity and have an abortion was wrong. The language of denial implied that Judy should have had the child, and that terminating that pregnancy was thwarting her destiny. Judy's breakdown after having the abortion

was portrayed as having been inevitable – the article presented no alternative interpretations of abortion and offered no advice as to how to healthily manage post-abortive emotions. That this article featured in *Cosmopolitan*, a women's magazine which considered itself to hold relatively liberal attitudes to female sexuality, is testament to the extent to which the notion of guilt as synonymous with abortion had permeated social consciousness.

It is interesting, therefore, to stand this article in contrast to the *Good Housekeeping* feature mentioned previously. In that article two of the contributors explicitly stated that they felt no sense of guilt, whilst a third admitted that she'd felt stupid for getting pregnant in the first place but expressed no remorse for having an abortion. Only one of the women expressed qualms: 'I suppose I do feel a bit guilty about having denied life to a certain child when I've given life to other ones, but in a way I'm surprised that there's even a little guilt because in every other way I'm quite sure I did the right thing.'<sup>40</sup> As stated above, these women's status as mothers protected them from public condemnation, yet, the fact that they felt compelled to explicitly state their lack of guilt demonstrates the prevalence of the notion that guilt was a universal side-effect of abortion. Whilst the press sought to defend legal abortion its repeated references to the anguish that terminating pregnancies instilled in women demonstrates a concession to the notion that abortion was inherently wrong. More than this, however, it can be argued that the press' attempts to make certain types of abortion acceptable in order to further their political agenda actually perpetuated the taboo and stigma they perceived themselves to be challenging.

### **Worthy and unworthy abortions**

Indeed, the press' rhetorical strategies bought into and perpetuated the notion that some abortions were more worthy of forgiveness than others. This moral relativism was evident in the attitudes of women themselves. In 1979 research psychologist Janet Simpson conducted a project to explore the experiences of women applying for an abortion and which revealed that women directly compared and weighed their own reasons for having an abortion against those of others. Whilst the women she interviewed believed their own reasons for terminating their pregnancies to be valid, they were highly sceptical of others who may have been procuring abortion 'too easily'.<sup>41</sup>

Women's justifications for abortion were highly subjective and were constructed within a scale of worthiness with some women being deemed more deserving of abortions than others.

This scale of justification can also be observed within the experiences of abortion described in the press. In her account in *Good Housekeeping*, Maggie implied that part of her potential abortive guilt was eased by the fact that she had been using contraception when she became pregnant but, 'if I had been careless, then it would have been my own fault and maybe then there would have been a real reason to be guilty'.<sup>42</sup> Maggie felt as though she deserved her abortion because she had behaved 'properly', implying that those women who failed to use contraception had a far less valid claim to abortion. Similarly, in an attempt to convince readers of the danger of the Corrie Bill, Bel Mooney made her point by listing sympathetic abortion situations: 'Young girls can be shy about obtaining contraceptive advice. Married couples (often struggling to cope with kids and low wages) find their contraceptive has failed. Women come off the pill for health reasons, and fall pregnant. Others are told there is a likelihood they will have a handicapped child.'<sup>43</sup> By virtue of the fact that they '[weren't] irresponsible people,' their claim to abortion was upheld. The status of abortion rights for couples who knowingly engaged in sexual intercourse without contraceptives was not articulated.

It must be reiterated that the purpose here is not to sceptically dismiss the 'truth' in the accounts presented but rather to suggest that the monopoly that tropes such as these had within public discourse was actually disruptive to the pro-abortion cause which the press are believed to have championed. The perpetual voicing of similar accounts only stood to make those that strayed from this norm seem deviant. The case studies of abortion described by the press were coded in a way that made them socially acceptable but in turn meant that experiences which could not be explained in such terms stood out in stark contrast. Despite the fact that the single-women in their mid-twenties who fell pregnant often lacked a personal support network and financial stability and therefore relied on institutional help, their voices were largely ignored within public discussions of abortion. When such women did speak out, their experiences were framed in such ways that only reinforced the taboo. In a *Panorama* episode on the Corrie Bill, Pat Shenstone, a married woman with 5 children who had an abortion, was identified by name and told her story sat in her living room, fully lit with her face to the camera. By contrast, single girl 'Karen', who was forced to have a



late-term abortion via the British Pregnancy Advisory Service after doctors in the West Country refused to give her an abortion, was identified by a pseudonym and was interviewed in the dark with only her silhouette visible. Although her voice was heard, the visual framing of her testimony served to highlight and reinforce the extent to which 'single-girl' abortions were deemed socially unacceptable; to have her so visibly contrasted to Pat only reinforced that stigma.<sup>44</sup>

In its attempts to present abortion in as socially acceptable a form as possible so as to further their political agenda of preventing restrictive legislative amendments to the 1967 Abortion Act, journalists in the British news-media narrowed the available discourse to an extent that undermined the pro-abortion position. As James Davison Hunter and Joseph E. Davis have articulated, 'language both reflects and shapes social reality, for words themselves frame how we make sense of experience ... those who have the power to establish the language of public debate have a tremendous advantage in determining the debate's outcome'.<sup>45</sup> Though the press provided a public forum for the discussion of abortion, the news media's recourse to the tropes and stereotypes of apologetic abortion, victim narratives, and guilt only made detailed and universal discussion and debate more difficult and thus denied the opportunity for any alternative pro-abortion views to be heard.

## **Conclusion**

It is thus apparent that there was a significant discrepancy between the British news-media's stated position on abortion and the nuances underpinning their abortion discourse. Mary Kenny was right when she asserted that the press articulated a pro-abortion agenda – the examined publications conceded the need for legal abortion in Britain and many articulated opposition to John Corrie's Abortion (Amendment) Bill. However, the rhetorical techniques, language and conceptual frameworks that were used to justify and promote this position problematised this position. The pro-abortion position held by the news media was defended on pragmatic grounds, rooted in the notion that abortions were inevitable and it was therefore in the public interest that women had access to safe, legal abortions performed by medical professionals. Yet this 'rational' position was articulated in highly emotive ways – victim narratives formed the backbone of the pro-abortion stance as abortion was portrayed as the preserve of the vulnerable

women who had been exploited. Whilst such an approach may have made the general public more receptive to the pro-abortion cause in light of Corrie's legislative challenge, it only accentuated the divide between 'worthy' and 'unworthy' abortions and thus reaffirmed the stigma and taboo surrounding abortion by heightening the sense of deviance which accompanied less traditionally sympathetic abortion experiences. The press' pro-abortion position rested upon the notion of apologetic abortion, a foundation that was entirely unstable as it conceded that abortion was inherently wrong. The news-media held that abortion was fundamentally bad but socially necessary and was thus forced to constantly negotiate the boundaries of social morality and the needs of individuals. Whilst the British news-media may have positioned itself as being pro-abortion, its unceasing portrayal of abortion as lamentable and a tragic last resort ultimately undermined this position.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Spectator*, 28 July 1979, 13.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this paper the term 'pro-abortion' will be used to denote individuals and groups who were in favour of legalized abortion and opposed to restrictions being placed on the 1967 Abortion Act. It is not intended to suggest that such individuals endorsed abortion in all instances or that they desired the legalisation of abortion-on-demand.

<sup>3</sup> James Davison Hunter and Joseph E. Davis, 'Cultural Politics at the Edge of Life', in *The Politics of Abortion and Birth Control in Historical Perspective*, ed. Donald T. Critchlow (University Park, Pennsylvania, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 109-10. Histories of abortion discourse include: Tracy A. Weitz, 'Rethinking the Mantra that Abortion Should be "Safe, Legal, and Rare"', *Journal of Women's History*, 22/3 (2010), 161-72; Laurie Shrage, 'From Reproductive Rights to Reproductive Barbie: Post-Porn Modernism and Abortion', *Feminist Studies*, 28/1 (2002), 61-93; Rosalind Pollack Petchesky, 'Fetal Images: The Power of Visual Culture in the Politics of Reproduction', *Feminist Studies*, 13/2 (1987), 263-92.

<sup>4</sup> Gail Davis and Roger Davidson, "'A Fifth Freedom" or "Hideous Atheistic Expediency"? The Medical Community and Abortion Law Reform in Scotland, c. 1960-1975', *Medical History*, 50

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(2006), 30. Examples of politically focussed work include: Stephen Brooke, *Sexual Politics: Sexuality, Family Planning and the British Left from the 1880s to the Present Day* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011); Leslie Hoggart, *Feminist Campaigns for Birth Control and Abortion Rights in Britain* (Lewiston, The Edwin Mellen Press, 2008); Dorothy McBride Stetson, *Abortion Politics, Women's Movements, and the Democratic State: A Comparative Study of State Feminism* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001); Martin Durham, *Sex and Politics: The Family and Morality in the Thatcher Years* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1991); Joni Lovenduski and Joyce Outshoorns eds., *The New Politics of Abortion* (London, Sage Publications, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> Abortion has, however, been the focus of study within other disciplines. Studies with a historical focus include: Fran Amery, 'Solving the "Woman Problem" in British Abortion Politics: A Contextualised Account', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 17/4 (2015), 551-567; Ellie Lee, 'Tensions in the Regulation of Abortion in Britain', *Journal of Law and Society*, 30/4 (2003), 532-553.

<sup>6</sup> For detailed discussion of the Lane Committee of Enquiry see, Ashley Wivel, 'Abortion Policy and Politics on the Lane Committee of Enquiry, 1971-1974', *Social History of Medicine*, 11/1, 109-35.

<sup>7</sup> Bernard Braine, MP quoted in *The Guardian*, Feb. 8, 1980, 8.

<sup>8</sup> *The Guardian*, 12 July 1979, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Colin Francome, *Abortion in the USA and the UK* (London, Ashgate, 2004), 114-5.

<sup>10</sup> Adrian Bingham, 'Newspaper Problem Pages and British Sexual Culture Since 1918', *Media History*, 18/1 (2012), 51-63.

<sup>11</sup> *The Spectator*, 28 July 1979, 13.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Adrian Bingham, *Family Newspapers? Sex, Private Life, and the British Popular Press 1918-1978* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009), 5-6.

<sup>14</sup> *The Times*, 15 Dec. 1980, 2.

<sup>15</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 5 Feb. 1980, 9.

<sup>16</sup> *The Observer*, 5 Aug. 1979, 39. *The Guardian*, 22 Dec. 1979, 3.

<sup>17</sup> *The Observer*, 4 Nov. 1979, 34.

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 12 July 1979, 9.

<sup>20</sup> Hoggart, *Feminist Campaigns for Birth Control and Abortion Rights in Britain*.

<sup>21</sup> *The Spectator*, 16 Feb. 1980, 15.

<sup>22</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 6 Feb. 1980, 9.

<sup>23</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 12 July 1979, 9.

<sup>24</sup> *The Guardian*, 22 Dec. 1979, 3. *The Guardian*, 6 May 1979, 39.

<sup>25</sup> *The Guardian*, 3 Feb. 1980, 10. See also: *The Observer*, 6 May 1979, 39; *The Observer*, 5 Aug. 1979, 39; *The Observer*, 3 Feb. 1980, 10.

<sup>26</sup> *The Times*, 6 Nov. 1981. *The Times*, 10 Feb. 1982, 11. *The Times*, 14 Feb. 1982, 8.

<sup>27</sup> *The Times*, 6 Feb. 1980, 15.

<sup>28</sup> Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution: English Women, Sex, and Contraception 1800-1975* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006), 294.

<sup>29</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 25 Apr. 1978, 12.

<sup>30</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 21 Nov. 1978, 9.

<sup>31</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 6 Feb. 1980, 9.

<sup>32</sup> *The Observer*, 15 Jul. 1979. Jo Richardson, quoted in *The Guardian*, 9 Feb. 1980, 5.

<sup>33</sup> *Panorama: Mercy or Murder? The Abortion Debate*, BBC1 television broadcast, Feb. 4 1980 [BFI InView, <https://www.bfi.org.uk/inview/title/7550>, accessed 18 Feb. 2015].

<sup>34</sup> *Good Housekeeping*, July 1980, 37-44.

<sup>35</sup> *New Statesman*, 8 Feb. 1980, 192-3.

<sup>36</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 3 Dec. 1979, 11.

<sup>37</sup> Simon Rogers, 'How Britain changed under Margaret Thatcher,' *The Guardian*, 8 Apr. 2013 [<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/datablog/2013/apr/08/britain-changed-margaret-thatcher-charts#data>, accessed 18 Feb. 2015]. Complete data set: [<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/ccc?key=0AonYZs4MzIZbdHE0dnFiRmIwM0Y3T1dMeXlwQVZBR2c#gid=18>, accessed 18 Feb. 2015].

<sup>38</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 30 May 1981, 7.

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<sup>39</sup> *Cosmopolitan*, July 1981, 144-5 & 205.

<sup>40</sup> *Good Housekeeping*, July 1980, 41.

<sup>41</sup> Janet Simpson, 'Having an Abortion: clients satisfaction with an out-patient day-care service', MSc dissertation, London School of Economics (1980), Wellcome Library, PPSIM/1.

<sup>42</sup> *Good Housekeeping*, July 1980, 41.

<sup>43</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 12 July 1979, 9.

<sup>44</sup> *Panorama*, Feb 4. 1980.

<sup>45</sup> Hunter and Davis, 'Cultural Politics at the Edge of Life,' 109-10.